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ABSTRACT

This paper discussed an alternative school in which the roles of teachers have been redefined to include counseling functions. The counselor is a staff developer for the teachers, a community resource person, and an advocate for students in police court procedures. The psychologist is a staff developer for special techniques, a definer of individualized curricula for students, and an interpreter of test results. Community resources are an integral part of the school. Socially maladjusted youth are helped to build self-esteem, a sense of self-worth and of interdependence. Group counseling and group projects serve as the basis for the school curriculum. The paper also discusses financial support for the alternative school, job-training programs and various details related to curriculum development. Students in the redefined setting proved increasingly more socially adjusted, and have finished high school and taken further training. The success of this alternative school structure is measured by a 90 percent attendance rating and by lack of major discipline problems within the school. (Author/BW)

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REDEFINITION OF COUNSELING ROLES IN AN ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL: A CASE HISTORY

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ABSTRACT

In one alternative school the roles of teachers have been redefined to include counseling functions. The counselor is a staff developer for the teachers, a community resource person, and an advocate for students in police court procedures. The psychologist is a staff developer for special techniques, a definer of individualized curricula for students, and an interpreter of test results. The success of this redefined structure is measured by a 90% attendance rating and by lack of major discipline problems within the school.

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Among models for alternative secondary schools are many which aim for reentry of the student into the more traditional school settings. Other alternative systems operate to use community resources as a major portion of the curriculum. Some "free" schools use independent work and choices in curriculum to retain students through the secondary school years. Few such schools have evolved from counseling contact hours in a resident half-way house for adolescent male offenders. Therefore it is important to trace the history of one such unique school in a major Eastern city.

The idea for a resident half-way house developed in 1967 when one dedicated teacher in a youth development center for pre-adjudicated male adolescents tried to work on techniques to reduce recidivism rates. It became clear that something had to be changed on the "outside." In cooperation with a neighborhood community center, plans for a facility were begun.

The community center owned a second large three story row house in an urban blight area where group meetings were held at night. This house became the residential center with three staff members, a director, and eight black male offenders. Programs were developed at night and coordinated with the group meetings already held in the house. The students attended regular school

and received extra counseling and programs such as job development training at night with the existing groups in the facility. Both groups were predominantly male and black.

The job training program centered on how to read and fill out application forms, how to act at job interviews, how to talk on telephones, and how to cross the city to go to interviews. Slowly group cohesiveness between the 18-25 year olds in the existing groups and the adolescent 14-17 year olds grew. The older men wanted to help the younger ones and the younger men were impressed with male models who were trying to order their own lives in a productive and cohesive manner.

It became clear that whatever positive was developing was often negated by the troubled students in their regular school day. At this same time the two nearby high schools were involved in student strikes and demonstrations. The staff and older group members worked to help calm tense hours in the public schools. Through their efforts strong support was gained from the community, the school system, and especially the students.

Financial support was sought and received from the public school system to set up an alternative school for the special subset of students who were not able to function in the public school and who were emotionally disturbed adolescents. The community resource people were concerned that most of these adolescent males had only female authority figures in their lives. Their male

models were almost exclusively street-wise figures. So a three-fold program was proposed for the row house center: a counseling service for the neighborhood to run through the day and early evening hours, a secondary school program for grades seven through twelve to run through the day, and a play street program for younger children to run after school and through the summer.

The School

The school program was to center on the emotional growth of the youth with goals to improve the youth's self-esteem thus helping him to project a positive self-image; to help youth to become self-sustaining -- socially, economically, and politically; and to help youth develop the ability to think clearly, communicate effectively and to learn easily. It was clear that a changed self-concept was the most vital area of concern since it was a necessary, but not sufficient, condition for the other two goals. Therefore a heavy concentration on counseling and group interaction was chosen as the method of approach.

Since the group of older youth had been working well with the younger students, the decision was made to use paraprofessionals as an integral part of the school's staff. The worker/student ratio was never to go as high as one to ten. Hopefully the ratio would be closer to one to five so that real individualization of work would be possible.

The curriculum would include academic work, physical education and a heavy concentration on interpersonal counseling, both one-to-one and in small groups.

One afternoon a week was devoted to group work with a staff member, usually a paraprofessional, as leader. Groups could stay in the building to talk or they could enjoy a field trip to a restaurant, a play, a museum, or a bowling alley. Furthermore, school would be dismissed early one afternoon so that the staff itself would be involved in a group session.

Because of the original student body the first staff members were all black and mostly male. However, there was an argument for some female staff members so that the adolescent males might learn how to relate to them. Only one of the staff members had a college degree, two a high school degree and one was a high school dropout. Volunteer help came from the evening group of older males and from other members of the neighborhood community.

The first students were all black males who were either under court supervision or had been truant 150 or more days in the previous school year. With a planned enrollment of 45, the actual enrollment soon became and continues to be, about 65 at a time. From the first there has been a waiting list of more than 250. Students remain on their home school lists with report cards and graduation diplomas coming from that school. Those who can

tolerate more structured situations may return half a day for special subjects like machine shop. Indeed some students have eventually returned full time to their home school.

Staff Development

From 1969 to 1975 the school has changed, but most of the original ideas and plans have remained. Techniques for staff development and student development are constantly under revision.

For example, teaching of reading turned out to be a major problem area. There were few black remedial reading teachers available. So far most of the reading remedial work has been done by a white professionally trained male. Students work individually and it is the only class which is scheduled regularly for students.

The other "teachers" were mostly paraprofessionals who had to take in-service training. Most were urged to attend college classes. From this thrust came the concept of requiring growth from the staff as well as from the student. Therefore staff were urged to complete high school and college. Since this is a large city there are traditional curriculums and also urban center college courses. To date, of the original four staff members the college graduate has nearly completed a doctorate, one high school graduate has left to teach in a traditional school and he, with the other high school graduate, have nearly completed a bachelor's degree. The high school dropout has taken an equivalency exam, earned a bachelor's degree, and enrolled in a master's program. Other

staff members have dropped out when they could not stand the pace of being a model on many dimensions -- including earning college degrees. Sixty percent of those hired have remained with 40% of them already through or nearly through with one degree.

Other staff development had to be on the dimensions of interpersonal relations. Staff had to learn to identify the emotional and social needs of the pupils and, indeed, of other staff members. Skills in listening, in counseling, and in group processes had to be developed. Therefore the once-a-week staff session was itself a model of group dynamic processes. The sessions were "run" by the staff counselor or the staff psychologist, who for the last three years has been a school psychologist serving on his internship. Techniques are demonstrated and specific instances of problems analyzed. In effect the staff are trained to operate as counselors in their classrooms. No third party monitors any problem which may occur in a teaching situation. There are no suspension slips. So from among the staff, solutions must be developed.

The counselor also holds individual sessions with each teacher. Student progress and/or emotional problems are discussed. The teacher is encouraged to express feelings and recognize value statements. Therefore the counselor serves as a role model for the paraprofessional teacher who may not have requisite skills in counseling techniques.

Students attempt to listen to each other and to recognize their own strengths and weaknesses. Students are encouraged to recognize their own feelings so they may be able to change behavior patterns.

For the last three years there has been a black staff counselor who serves a unique function. He operates as a community relations person and as an advocate for the student. As the community liaison person, he works to obtain volunteer time, equipment, and monies. He develops contacts for museum visits, for plays, for trips. He must know community referral agencies; such as where to send pupils for glasses. In addition he is the contact person for home visits. If a student is absent, the counselor calls the home or may visit there. For anything positive occurring in the student's progress, the counselor calls or visits the home. Many parents do not know how to handle such contacts. Most previous calls or visits from school have meant crises or disasters.

For the student, the counselor functions as advocate for job placement, for follow-up after graduation, and for support in any court proceedings. Most urban schools have court workers for their pupils. However the counselor can add personal statements for his pupils. For example, a student may have been truant thirty days in a school year but if this is compared to one hundred fifty days the previous year, progress is emphasized. The counselor has had to learn court procedures and the special language used. He

must also be aware of new laws so he can best help the student. In sum the counselor functions partly as a community psychologist.

The staff school psychologist serves a more technical function. He helps find the correct placement level for academic subjects so that individualized programs can be structured. It is particularly important that placement be correct for the remedial reading teacher. Any technical testing or decisions on materials used are in the psychologist's province.

Probably the most important function for the psychologist is monitoring for any serious maladaptive behavior within the school. The students are all "emotionally disturbed" and possibilities for volatile, hostile reactions are many. It is important to recognize the "early warning" cues. Indeed the staff itself may need the counseling function applied to some of their own interpersonal relations. For paraprofessionals to learn the underlying dynamics is most important in an affective based school like this. Consequently individual and group conference time are needed with the psychologist. Most of the time this position has been held by a white male. Three of the four came from very traditional college curriculums with a heavy emphasis on testing. It has been difficult for some of them to break role expectations and function more as clinical psychologists involved in family therapy. Perhaps a clinical intern would be more appropriate than a school psychologist intern.

Community Relations

Relations with parents, nearby agencies, and volunteer help must be of the best or such a school has little chance to work. The counselor and psychologist work with psychiatrists in an outpatient unit. For the most seriously disturbed students, help from psychiatrists is available.

A liaison is maintained with a live-in facility run by a local church. If emergencies call for a short term placement for any male, this home is available.

Since these emotionally disturbed teenagers come from emotionally disturbed homes, work with the family becomes doubly important. Home calls, home visits, and many activities involving the entire family are all provided. An effort is made to have positive input about the student. In fact, staff members have gone to students' houses to escort them to school if the student seems worried about crossing rival gang territory. Such positive approaches have paid off in terms of volunteer help and parental commitment to changing relationships with their sons and daughters.

Various university faculty members offer technical aid in planning curriculum and getting materials. The older men's group still helps with extra projects and services. The school makes efficient use of its many contacts to diversify and improve its work.

Informal Evaluation

Through its existence the school center has had more black males; however, the number of black females is increasing. The number of different gangs represented in the school is from 6-15 at any one time. When spread over 65 pupils and allowing for some non-gang members, there can be no one gang dominant. However much gang activity in-fighting could occur. To date there has been no serious incident -- no knifing, shooting, maiming, or even big battle. Most of the fighting is at the level of scuffling with much "mouthing off" and the main efforts addressed to determining pecking order relationships.

Within the school there has been no drug or alcohol abuse problems. Some students have been involved in drug use and have constituted a disproportionate share of those with whom the school has "failed." However, drug pushing and drug use in school are virtually nonexistent.

The daily attendance rate runs about 90%. Since it is clear that being there is the first requirement for success, this school surely turns the attendance figures around. Students who were truant 150 days out of 180 now attend school 150 days.

Students who can tolerate little structure or little discipline from any authority figure slowly change to the point where they can follow through with commitments and initiate activities. Some pupils hold down parttime jobs or attend their home school.

However a certain percentage (roughly 20%) cannot adjust to any restrictive environment. Prognosis for such pupils would not be good. A real measure of success for the school could be the reclaiming of 80% of these emotionally crippled students.

Nearly all the students now graduate from high school. Roughly 60% go on to some more training, be it job or college. There appears to be no real difference between male and female students (who now number 25% of the pupils).

Summary

The changing functions of paraprofessional "teachers," of trained counselor and school psychologist have worked in a small alternative secondary school program to reverse school attendance patterns, to change behavior, and to motivate disturbed adolescents so they are better able to function in their world.

Community resources are an integral part of the school. Socially maladjusted youth are helped to build self-esteem, a sense of self-worth and of interdependence. Group counseling and group projects serve as the basis for the school curriculum. The students have become increasingly more socially adjusted and have finished high school and taken further training.